



Speaking the truth in love

Eph 4:15

6 February 2017

**ARCHBISHOP ANTHONY FISHER OP
PASTORAL MESSAGE IN RESPONSE
TO THE BEGINNING OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION'S
FINAL HEARING ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

My dear friends,

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has begun its final three-week review of the performance of the Catholic Church in Australia. And what has been revealed has already been harrowing.

I have personally felt shaken and humiliated by this information, as I have by other important revelations in the Royal Commission to date. The Church is sorry and I am sorry for past failures that left so many so damaged. I know that many of our priests, religious and lay faithful feel the same: as Catholics we hang our heads in shame.

We have already heard many distressing and shameful cases of sexual abuse told to the Royal Commission by courageous survivors. Today we heard these individual stories aggregated in data presented to the Commission on the proportion of priests and religious with claims of abuse made against them since 1950.

To my shame and sadness it would seem that Australia-wide as many as 384 Catholic diocesan priests, 188 religious priests, 597 religious brothers and 96 religious sisters have had claims of child sexual abuse made against them since 1950. Claims have also been made against 543 lay church workers and another 72 whose religious status is unknown.

Unlike previous hearings based on particular cases or events, and involving interviews of those connected with those events in some way, this hearing will address 'the big picture' and feature expert witnesses along with Church leaders and lay people, some of whom will be drawn from our Archdiocese. The Royal Commission will now focus on two main issues: what factors caused or contributed to historical child sex abuse cases in the Church and failures to respond adequately; and what the Church has done or plans to do to address this by way of changes to structures, policies and culture, the

discernment of priestly and religious vocations, formation and supervision of those engaged in ministry, and so on.

The report refers to 'claims and alleged perpetrators'. The report does not distinguish claims that were proven at law from those that were untested; nor does the report distinguish claims that were substantiated by some internal Church investigation from those that were accepted by the Church without investigation.

Even though the statistics show that the overwhelming majority of incidents occurred in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, and that alleged abuse declined very considerably thereafter, we are not complacent when it comes to child safety and to ensuring a child safe environment in the Church, and we recognise our responsibility to ensure that all measures are in place to prevent this happening again. We also recognise that there are abuse victims who are yet to come forward and perhaps never will. And we must face the fact that claims have been made against some 7 per cent of the priests ministering within the 3 dioceses of greater Sydney since 1950.

The coming weeks will be traumatic for everyone involved, especially the survivors. Confronting as it will be, I remain determined to do all we can to assist those who have been harmed by the Church and to work towards a culture of greater transparency, accountability and safety for all children.

As you may know, we have already done a great deal to ensure that allegations made to our Archdiocese are dealt with promptly, justly and compassionately; that counselling and redress are made available to survivors; that we have in place 'best practice' structures and policies to safeguard children; that we engage in rigorous processes of discerning and forming vocations; that we train our clergy, religious, teachers and lay church workers in contemporary standards in this area; and that we are doing all we can to make every part of the Church safe for all children and vulnerable people.

I am convinced that at the end of the humiliation and purgation through which we are presently passing, we will be a humbler, more aware and more compassionate Church in this area. But we are on a journey and there is still much to do: for this we are grateful for the patient study and professional guidance of the Royal Commission.

During the current hearing I will be part of a panel with other Archbishops to discuss not only what went wrong in the past but also what we can do better in the future. Together we will have the opportunity to restate the determination of Catholic leaders and the Catholic community to eradicate this evil from the Church, and to demonstrate the good work we have done (and still plan to do). I am grateful to our parishes, schools and agencies for the important work they are doing to make our Church a safe place.

The media will give the present hearing a great deal of attention over the coming weeks, and some of the reports will be confronting. Many of you, so loyal to the Church, will feel upset or demoralised by the coverage: if so I ask you to talk the matter through with your parish priest or supervisor. Priests might speak with their dean, regional bishop or the chancery.

Counselling is available from Catholic Care on 13 18 19. Our Safeguarding Office can be contacted on 9390 5810.

And, importantly, I strongly encourage anyone alleging sexual abuse to contact the police: they are in the best position to investigate.

Please pray for all those involved in this hearing for wisdom and compassion. Above all, please pray for the survivors and their families at this most difficult time.

Our Lady, Help of Christians, Comforter of the Afflicted, pray for us.

Yours sincerely in Christ



Most Rev Anthony Fisher OP
Catholic Archbishop of Sydney

For information on safeguarding and protection of children protocols and complaint handling please contact the director of The Safeguarding and Ministerial Integrity Office on 9390 5810.

For a summary of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney Policy on the care, well-being and protection of children and young people and for the Code of Conduct – Working with children and young people, please visit www.sydneycatholic.org and click on the link to our Safeguarding Office.

To view this as a video message visit www.sydneycatholic.org

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